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On the Effect of Good or Bad Times on Committals to Prison.

By THE REV. JOHN CLAY.

[Read before the Statistical Section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, at Liverpool, 23rd September, 1854.]

It has long been a popular opinion that committals to prison increase under the pressure of "*bad times*," and diminish when that pressure is removed. This opinion appears to be in many respects erroneous; and it may not be useless, therefore, to show how, in reality, crime and disorder, as indicated by committals to prison, are affected by the vicissitudes in the industrial and social state of the working classes.

The facts and observations which I have to submit are drawn from the annual reports which it has been my duty to present to the magistracy of Lancashire since 1824. They relate to the county house of correction at Preston—the chief prison for the northern division of Lancashire—which division includes the large manufacturing towns of Preston, Blackburn, Burnley, Chorley, Haslingden, Accrington, &c. The population of North Lancashire was 402,600 in 1841, and 461,400 in 1851*. My report for 1826 contained the first notice of the connexion between distress and committals; and I therefore venture to quote the following passage in it:—"The interval between July, 1824, and July, 1825, was one of general prosperity and comfort among the labouring classes of the surrounding district; that from July, 1825, to July, 1826, included a period of perhaps unprecedented distress. Yet, in this latter period, the felony list presented no augmentation: . . . While 40,000 or 50,000 of the poor were existing upon charitable contributions, it cannot be ascertained that a single theft (recorded in the calendar) was caused solely by hunger. The few persons who pleaded distress as an excuse for their offences were, in every case, old offenders."

During the prevalence of this distress, I had many opportunities of witnessing what I have often seen since, the fortitude and patience exercised by the working classes in times of suffering, and the admirable self-denial with which many, who were themselves in poverty, assisted the utterly destitute. From a table given in my report for 1830, it appeared that, during the four ordinary years ending with June, 1824, the annual average of committals to the sessions was 119; the prosperous year 1825 produced 177 committals; the following year of distress, 172; and the year of reviving prosperity (ending July, 1827) no less than 269.

"This lamentable anomaly in the moral condition of the working classes can only arise from the fact that high wages, to the ignorant and uneducated poor, bring with them the means of gratifying the propensity to intoxication, which is so fatal to their comfort and character."

* The Hundred of Lonsdale commits *cases for trial* to the Lancaster sessions. These cases—few in number—are therefore excluded from consideration. All offenders *convicted summarily* are sent to Preston. This having been the invariable practice, the question treated of in this paper is not affected by it.

The opinion thus expressed a quarter of a century ago has been but too well confirmed by the experience of every succeeding year.

The ten years ending with June, 1844, were marked by several events greatly prejudicial to the moral and industrial welfare of the working classes in North Lancashire. In 1836-7, a spinner's "*strike*" at Preston threw nearly 9,000 hands out of employ for about four months. Nearly two-fifths of these hands were under nineteen years of age; and the consequence was a great increase in the number of *young* offenders committed to the sessions. It was noted, however, at the time, that "idleness and not want had been the immediate cause of crime in almost all the cases which could be clearly referred to the "*strike*."* And even in this year of distress, the committals to the sessions were less by fifty-nine than those of the corresponding period ten years before, when "employment for the poor had again become pretty well distributed."† From 1838 to 1842 (with a favourable interval in 1840), want of employ and consequent privation gradually pressed more and more upon the manufacturing population of North Lancashire, until, in the winter of 1842-3, their sufferings became severe almost beyond example. At this time, also, a spirit of sedition and riot had loosened the restraints which the masses in North Lancashire are usually willing to acknowledge; and the autumn of 1842 was marked by an amount of agitation and violence which betokened no slight danger to the permanent welfare of the manufacturing districts. Two years before this time, however, and owing, no doubt, to the growing (and providential) conviction of the necessity for such a measure, the county police force had been organized; and it was now found capable of arresting and of permanently subduing the dangerous spirit which had been excited into action. Under all these circumstances, therefore, a considerable increase in committals might be expected. The zeal and activity of the new constabulary added to the number of apprehensions and committals, though there might be no corresponding increase of actual crime. Political disaffection encouraged dishonesty and violence to an extent which poverty alone would not have provoked; at this time, also, prison discipline in North Lancashire was in a state calculated to promote rather than repress crime; and to all this it may be added that, hitherto, little or no progress had been made in efforts to extend the benefits and blessings of education.

"Of ninety-six men tried for riot, &c., in the Chartist outbreak in the autumn of 1842, sixty were unable to read, and thirty-six were ignorant of their Saviour's name."

I present a summary of the committals for the ten years now treated of, in which it will be observed that, in the year of greatest distress, the ordinary committals were 20 per cent. below those of the preceding year. In order to free a comparison between the several years from the effects of temporary or accidental influence, the following offenders are excluded:—1, soldiers under sentence of court martial; 2, debtors; 3, females under *summary* conviction;‡

* Report for 1837.

† Report for 1830.

‡ These are excluded because at one time they were committed to Lancaster Castle and at another to the Preston house of correction.

4, Chartist rioters. The remarks are literally or substantially quoted from the reports of the respective years:—

Year ending 1st July.	Committed to Sessions.	Committed Summarily.	Remarks.
1835.....	168	642	
1836.....	187	715	
1837.....	277	627	{ "Spinner's strike, which lasted from the end of October to February."
1838.....	302	762	
1839.....	361	655	
1840.....	394	937	{ "Increase of committals mainly attributable to the establishment of the County Police." "No want of employ, and times favourable."
1841.....	485	901	
1842.....	611	1,053	
1843.....	497*	1,215	{ "Trade in a depressed state." "Great and prolonged suffering." "The depression at its lowest point." "Full employ. Prison discipline well established."
1844.....	433	894	

* This number is exclusive of 123 Chartist rioters.

The next ten years, ending with June, 1854, embraced two seasons of great manufacturing prosperity and one of extreme distress. The following is a short summary of the period, framed on the same principle as the one given above:—

Year.	Sessions' Cases.	Summary Convictions.	Remarks.
1845.....	301	700	{ "Abundance of work. Prison discipline in beneficial operation." "Occupation at the factories not so readily obtained. Many hundreds of hand-loom weavers out of employ."
1846.....	289	666	
1847.....	366	646	{ "Never have the combined evils of scarcity of food and scarcity of employ pressed so heavily." "The distress at its maximum."
1848.....	343	843	
1849.....	339	1,279	{ "Times greatly improved." "A period of great and continued prosperity."
1850.....	325	1,323	
1851.....	387	1,456	{ "A period of great and continued prosperity." "The Preston strike."
1852.....	417	1,226	
1853.....	442	1,012	
1854.....	470	957	

The first season of prosperity (ending with June, 1845) occurred at a time when a vigorous and reformatory prison discipline had begun to develop highly satisfactory effects in the decrease of committals, and especially of recommittals. The manufacturing distress which followed in 1847-8, unlike that of 1842-3, was attended by no Chartist excitement, nor by any other influence likely to aggravate whatever tendency to crime distress might have created.

In my report for 1847, I observed: "Never within the term of

my chaplaincy have the combined evils of scarcity of food and scarcity of employ pressed so heavily as during the last winter; and never—to the great credit of thousands of sufferers—have offenders pleading distress for their faults been fewer in number.” Yet, in these very hard times, the committals to the sessions were not increased to the extent which might have been expected, and the summary convictions were fewer than they had been for ten years.

The increase to the sessions, as invariably the case in times of compulsory idleness, and as previously exemplified in the strike of 1836-7, consisted almost entirely of boys. “It is chiefly from among the *idle*, not the *hungry*, factory-boys that the additions to our year’s calendar are drawn,” “Juvenile delinquency (as compared to the preceding year) was increased to the amount of 92 per cent.* In the winter of 1847-8, distress pressed upon the operative classes with a severity never before exceeded, perhaps never before equalled. My report for that year contains a table framed from data collected by the chief constable of the county, Capt. Woodford, “showing the absence of any marked connexion between poverty and crime, as well as *the creditable disproportion between sufferers and offenders.*” It appeared from the returns in question that, during this disastrous period, 45,000 mill-hands in North Lancashire, irrespective of other operatives, were either working short time, or were altogether unemployed; and that in the Preston Union nearly 12,000 *adults* were receiving out-door relief; yet the committals to the sessions, so far from exhibiting an increase, showed a decrease of nearly 7 per cent. on the committals of the preceding year.

The excess of summary convictions in 1847-8 arose chiefly from vagrants and workhouse disorderlies.† In 1849, the prosperity, which had ebbed so far and so long, began to flow once more through our manufacturing districts, until in the summer of 1853 it reached a height seldom equalled in the industrial history of the country. But the figures in the preceding page bear witness that this tide of material benefit was productive of—at least accompanied by—no little moral wreck. When the season of suffering had passed away it became too manifest that the wholesome lesson which it might have taught had been neglected. Thousands who had resisted the temptations of distress yielded to the temptations of prosperity. Good wages were too often squandered in vicious indulgence; and committals for offences occasioned by drunkenness began and increased with lamentable rapidity. If a comparison be made between the crime and disorder attendant on the three years of operative distress (1846 to 1848) and the four years of abundant work and high wages (1850 to 1853), it will be found that the average yearly

* Report for 1847.

† In the very valuable report of Capt. Willis, the Chief Constable of the borough of Manchester, for 1847, that gentleman expresses his satisfaction that “upon the expiration of a year marked by almost unexampled prostration of the trade and commerce of the country, and consequent distress amongst the working classes,” he can produce “returns which will bear advantageous comparison with those of previous years.” A table given by Capt. Willis shows that the committals for trial and under summary convictions, in the borough of Manchester, for the two *prosperous* years 1844 and 1845, amounted to 10,436; and that for the two years of *distress* which followed, 1847 and 1848, they amounted only to 7,635.

committals to the sessions during the *hard times* were 332, while during the *good times* they were 390. The yearly average of *summary* committals during the hard times was 718, during the good times it was 1,249! or, taking all the committals together, 1,051 was the yearly average from 1846 to 1848, and 1,639 the yearly average from 1850 to 1853.* The comparison now made rests on conditions only affected by good and bad times. No social or political agitation interfered with those conditions; no changes in police or in prison discipline influenced the number of apprehensions or of committals; and the ten years now under consideration may therefore be regarded as well calculated to show the true relation which subsists between crime and disorder on the one hand, and good or bad times on the other.

The last of the ten years under consideration—the year ending 1st July, 1854—saw the town of Preston, with its 70,000 inhabitants, suffering from a contest which will leave its disastrous consequences behind for many years.

The Preston strike threw out of work about 18,000 factory hands, to say nothing of other operatives whose employment depended more or less directly on the mills. The results in respect to committals from the town were such as the experience of similar events in past years prepared me to anticipate. On comparing the six months of the strike with the corresponding six months of the previous year, it appeared that the committals to the sessions of youths under 21 rose from 18 to 36; youths committed summarily decreased from 49 to 40. The committals of male adults to the sessions rose from 42 to 52; male adults summarily convicted decreased from 71 to 47. The committals of young females decreased from 30 to 10; the decrease in the committal of older females was from 68 to 40. As a general result, committals of all kinds from Preston during six months of the strike (from 1st November, 1853, to 30th April, 1854) diminished 22·7 per cent. as compared to the corresponding six months of the preceding year; they diminished 32 per cent. as compared to the committals of the six months immediately preceding the strike.

To be taken in connexion with these facts is one which will serve to explain them, viz., the diminished squandering of money in public houses and beer-houses to the amount of 1,000*l.* per week during the time the strike lasted.

In order also to do justice to the good conduct during the strike of those who had been misled into the deplorable act, it should be remembered that while only eighty-six young persons under 21 years of age were sent to prison, more than 8,500 young persons of the class to which they belonged had been living for more than six months in complete idleness, and in considerable suffering.

The general conclusions deducible from the facts now detailed, appear to be that “bad times” may add a few cases to the sessions

* During the four prosperous years the committals were much more affected by Irish immigrants than during the three years of distress. Putting the Irish out of the question for both periods, and taking sessions and summary cases together, the discrepancy remains very striking, viz., average of three bad years 946, of four good years 1,346.

calendars, and that "good times" greatly aggravate summary convictions; that the increase to the sessions consists of the young and thoughtless, who, when thrown into idleness, are liable to lapse into dishonesty; and that the increase of summary cases arises from the intemperance which high wages encourage among the ignorant and sensual.

In my report for the prosperous year 1845, it was shown "that when in 1842-3 the operative was suffering most severely from want of employment, intoxication, as a cause of crime, was, compared to other causes, less than 17 per cent.; while now (1845) that labour and skill are in the greatest demand, and wages are unusually high, the criminality attributable to this debasing propensity has swollen to 41 per cent." In a previous report (1843), in noticing the small proportion of females committed during the distress of 1842-3 (1 female to 6.6 males), it was suggested that "in it we find what strengthens the opinion as to the inadequacy of poverty alone to account for the amount of crime. Every one conversant with the condition and habits of the poor knows that when distress falls upon their families it is the mothers who feel it most poignantly. Too often they and their children are wanting necessary food while their husbands are spending the last sixpence in the alehouse. Too often, when the husband is on the tramp seeking employ, or still worse, when he has entirely deserted his family, the poor wife is left to resist as she may the temptation to obtain by dishonesty the bread for which her children are crying. When, further, the large amount of destitute widowhood is taken into the account, the conclusion appears to me irresistible, that '*want and distress, uncombined with dissolute habits, are rarely operative in producing crime.*'"

I venture to hope that the truths which I have now endeavoured to establish will not be regarded as the barren results of a mere statistical investigation, but as a matter of deep moral and social significance.

In this country, and at this time, it ought to be felt as a grief and a reproach demanding anxious attention, that the material prosperity of the industrious classes should be so constantly accompanied by the moral degradation of a large portion of them. In the tendencies and habits of many of our artizans and labourers, there must be something deeply wrong when "*what should have been for their wealth is to them an occasion of falling.*" The deplorable truth is, that the wide want of moral and religious instruction, and of really useful knowledge, debars MILLIONS of our working population from the true use and enjoyment of the advantages within their power. The money earned by their toil and skill, instead of being employed in accordance with the dictates of prudence and the requirements of civilized life, is dissipated in rioting and drunkenness, and the results are misery, crime, and the jail.
